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Bolivia: Implications of Continued Military Rule

An Intelligence Memorandum

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Bolivia: Implications of Continued Military Rule

Summary

The Bolivian military, which has controlled the nation's politics since 1964, is almost certain to remain the predominant force through the 1980s. Whether the current leader, General Garcia Meza, is replaced in August is immaterial. Top army commanders will be the real power brokers.

The Bolivian military's almost total lack of professionalism sets it apart from its South American counterparts. Top leaders regularly claim to be acting as guardian of the nation's welfare, but their primary motive for seizing power is financial gain. The cycle is perpetuated by ambitious junior officers who are motivated by the same expectations for wealth as their superiors.

Although bitter internal rivalries often give the impression that the military is on the verge of destroying itself, most officers share the same tenets, and this holds the institution together. Moreover, the officer corps historically closes ranks in the face of perceived challenges to its predominance. Intramilitary disputes rarely lead to violence; palace coups are the rule, with diplomatic exile or banishment to obscure posts the fate of the losers.

Bolivia has little to offer Washington beyond support for US positions in international forums; yet it sees a need for close ties no matter what strongman is in power. US aid props up the sagging economy, while US diplomatic backing provides a mantle of political legitimacy. Highly aware of the havoc that can be wreaked on internal stability by a total withdrawal of US aid, Bolivian governments for the foreseeable future will make at least token efforts to respond to US concern, especially the need to institute an effective program to deal with the country's illegal narcotics industry.

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Bolivia: Implications of Continued Military Rule

The Bolivian armed forces historically have failed to fulfill their primary mission—defense of the nation. Since independence in 1825, inept military leadership has produced a series of crushing defeats that have cost Bolivia more than half of its national territory and its only outlet to the sea. Unable to perform competently against foreign forces, the military turned inward, producing 189 coups in 156 years. ■

Yet even in this arena, the armed forces suffered defeat—the institution was almost destroyed following a reformist revolution in 1952. Only the government's need to create a counterweight to the growing power of organized labor saved the military from complete dismemberment. By 1964 a revitalized, ambitious, and unified military turned out the civilian government and assumed the predominant position it enjoys today. ■

Motivations for Coup Plotting

The nature of Bolivian society lends itself to authoritarian rule. The majority of the population is composed of poor, apolitical Indians essentially outside the economic mainstream. Civilian power centers are few and easily manipulated. The few genuine political, labor, or peasant leaders can be rapidly jailed, silenced, or exiled—and usually are. ■

Bolivia's political parties are undisciplined, quarrelsome, and usually dominated by a single stubborn individual. This often produces interparty deadlocks that paralyze government operations—practically inviting military intervention. After the 1979 presidential election, for example, the Bolivian congress was unable to follow constitutional guidelines to determine a winner. Neither of the front-runners would cede in the interest of a higher national good; each reportedly indicated he preferred a military takeover to having the other become president. The result was a temporary government of dubious constitutionality that was so weak and inept it lasted less than three months before being ousted by the military. ■

Bolivia's fledgling civilian institutions also are inherently weak. Authorities have little power to enforce their ruling, and their decisions can be ignored or diluted. Personalism, rather than respect for law, tends to be the way of life. Under these circumstances, civilian rule usually proves ineffective, inviting the military to step in to impose order. ■

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Corruption is Bolivia's most widespread problem and the prime motivation behind most coups. Endemic at all levels of Bolivian society, it ranges from parents bribing teachers to ensure good grades for their children to public-sector projects incurring huge cost overruns so that key planners can be paid off. Among both civilian and military leaders, corruption has produced an unofficial code of conduct that allows illegal monetary gain as a proper reward for governmental service. Broad acceptance of this practice makes reform almost impossible. ■

Corruption in the military has essentially destroyed its professionalism. In the main, an officer seeks to seize power in order to enrich himself; concern for the nation's welfare is secondary. Moreover, this view has passed from one generation to the next—younger officers expect to benefit from the spoils system as they advance through the ranks. ■

The opportunity to amass large sums of illicit money often depends solely on an officer's ingenuity. During President Banzer's tenure in the mid-1970s, for example, generals in outlying areas reportedly profited by falsifying troop strength reports and pocketing the salaries of their fictional personnel. ■

Under the regime of General Garcia Meza, institutional corruption has risen appreciably, largely because of a new emphasis on government links with the illegal narcotics industry. Several levels of officials reportedly have received millions of dollars in bribes from narcotics traffickers in return for allowing drugs to flow unhindered into the illicit market. The long-term effect is not yet clear, but many in the military believe this exceeds even their lax standards of acceptability. Considerable sentiment exists to root out at least the most notorious traffickers and their collaborators. ■

Factors Influencing Military Unity

The Bolivian military is not monolithic. A variety of social and political philosophies are present within the officer corps. But the tenets uniting the institution are not disputed and intramilitary differences are of secondary importance. Moreover, all disagreements are submerged quickly when challenges arise to either the military's authority or its position in society. ■

A key element of unity is that the military regards itself as the dominant social class—replacing the traditional mining and landowning aristocracy. The old social order was dismantled by the 1952 revolution. A new elite failed to develop, and the military stepped in. Rising to the top by default, the military proceeded to block the social changes under way, although it charged that the post-1952 governments had themselves done the destroying. ■

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Since 1964 military regimes have viewed themselves as saviors and nationalists whose duty is to integrate a country beset by internal cleavages and to implement vitally needed development programs. These same rulers, however, have cited the difficulty of accomplishing these goals as justification for prolonging their stay in the presidential chair. Power cannot be returned to civilians until the politicians are sufficiently "educated" to carry out their responsibilities in a democratic society. ■

Unity also stems from a pervasive conviction that a civilian government would dismember and humiliate the military. The officer corps remembers the severe purge it suffered after the 1952 revolution, particularly in its senior ranks. The officers who survived—a large part of today's hierarchy—have developed a paranoia, vowing never to let the armed forces become subservient to vengeful civilians. ■

Another point rallying the military is the alleged threat of radical subversion, a threat that has little basis in fact. Bolivia's Communist Party is extremely weak, and the only significant leftist party, Jaime Paz Zamora's Movement of the Revolutionary Left, advocates nonviolent methods to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, the argument is widely accepted, especially to justify a military takeover. General Garcia Meza, for example, annulled the 1980 presidential election and seized power with the claim that the military had to act to save the country from Communism. ■

The strength of institutional unity does not preclude bitter power struggles within the officer corps, particularly over competing presidential ambitions. At any time, several rival factions—each led by a high-ranking officer—may be maneuvering for control of one of the half-dozen key regiments or negotiating a tenuous alliance. ■

Violent confrontation is usually avoided, however, for fear that it would undermine the discipline, unity, and authority of the armed forces and therefore benefit the left. Plotters usually adhere to an unwritten rule that power grabs must not divide the armed forces, and leadership passes to the officer who proves to have the most support among key military units. Losers are usually forced into retirement or relegated to obscure assignments at home or abroad. ■

In the face of meaningful civilian opposition, the military generally closes ranks, even around an unpopular leader. An exception occurred in November 1979, when poor preparation by the plotters and growing civilian pressure combined to unseat Col. Alberto Natusch Busch after only 16 days. This incident humiliated the military, and a repetition of this episode is unlikely in the near future. ■

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Unity does not preclude the military from replacing one of its own with another officer when the current strongman falls into disfavor. Since 1964 the majority of Bolivia's military rulers have left the presidential palace in this fashion--a fate that also seems likely for General Garcia Meza. ■

The Influence of the United States

The military power monopoly has shown minimal responsiveness to civilian critics within Bolivia--such as the church--and shows little interest in meeting the needs of the nation. The Bolivian military is, however, highly sensitive to Washington's concerns because US aid is vital to the country's primitive economy, and US diplomatic acceptance provides a much-needed mantle of legitimacy. US attitudes, therefore, play a major role in Bolivia's internal developments. ■

US attitudes also affect other nations' relations with Bolivia. Continuing US opposition to the Garcia Meza regime, particularly to its ties to the narcotics trade--reflected in the withdrawal of the US Ambassador--and suspension of aid--has isolated Bolivia diplomatically and caused a concomitant slowdown of financial assistance from most of the world community. Even Argentina, which originally strongly backed Garcia Meza, is having second thoughts, largely because of continuing US opposition. ■

Garcia Meza's inability to obtain US approval prompted his government's primary advisory council to note that international relations are decisive for internal peace and development. Although acknowledging the importance of recognition from such major South American powers as Brazil and Argentina, it pointed out that continued estrangement from the United States outweighed their support. It then listed a number of specific measures it believed had to be taken to satisfy US conditions for normalization. ■

Garcia Meza has taken some steps to obtain a normalization of relations with the United States. He grudgingly acknowledged US demands to clean up the narcotics trade by reluctantly removing his chief military supporter because of charges that he was closely linked to drug traffickers. Also, he briefly instituted operations to suppress the illegal narcotics industry, even though he reportedly is one of the main beneficiaries of its profits. ■

The continued lack of US support for Garcia Meza encouraged his rivals to plot against him, with US acceptance--or at least acquiescence--a vital part of all coup planners' strategies. Despite Washington's avoidance of favor to one faction over another, Bolivia's military leaders consistently interpret even the smallest US gesture--or lack thereof--as highly significant. ■

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With few alternatives available, Bolivia is usually compelled to make at least some effort to respond to US concerns. Garcia Meza's antinarcotics program, for example, led to the arrests of some minor traffickers and intermittently disrupted the illegal cocaine trade. Major traffickers are still at large, however, and the regime's commitment to the program is in doubt—Garcia Meza recently terminated military support to the effort. Nevertheless, military leaders are keenly aware that being held at arm's length by the United States wreaks havoc with the ability of any Bolivian regime to govern effectively. ■

Prospects

Despite its proclivity for coup plotting, the Bolivian military is the most cohesive institution in the country. It is not likely to withdraw from politics in the next decade and will almost certainly look over the shoulder of any future president, either military or civilian. ■

The military regimes of the next several years will not make any major changes in the style of governing, although increasing civilian participation in both the government and domestic politics is likely. A new constitution will be required, for example, and election and party reform bills will be discussed, giving the appearance of democracy. Any such efforts, however, will be designed more to placate perceived US concerns than out of a commitment to civilian rule. ■

Garcia Meza's successor—to be chosen by his military colleagues by 17 July—probably will be an officer they judge to be acceptable to the United States. His first task will be to secure a normalization of relations with the United States and other nations, which is considered essential for getting financial help for the country's severe economic problems. ■

The Bolivians believe normal relations with the United States will require an effective program to deal with the narcotics issue. At a minimum, they believe this means the arrest of several of the major traffickers and less military involvement in the illegal cocaine industry. These are possible in light of both the Bolivian military's perceived need for close ties with the United States and the apparent disgust of junior officers with the military's tainted image. ■

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